

Objectivism Through Ayn Rand's Fiction

ARU Syllabus

Last updated: April 8, 2025

COURSE TITLE: Objectivism Through Ayn Rand's Fiction

COURSE YEAR AND QUARTERS: 2024-25, Q3-Q4

PREEQUISITE COURSES: None

COURSE DESCRIPTION

To write the kinds of stories she wanted to write and to portray the kinds of characters she wanted to portray, Ayn Rand created her own philosophy, Objectivism. There is no better introduction to Objectivism than to consider the major intellectual questions and topics that occupied Rand's thinking as she wrote *We the Living*, *Anthem*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*. That is what we will examine in this two-quarter course.

Rand's novels are self-consciously philosophical novels, containing abstract themes, characters driven by opposing moral principles, and conflicts rooted in clashing worldviews. And more than that, most of Rand's fictional heroes discover and embody new philosophical ideas, original to Rand. Rand was concerned with philosophical questions only when she saw that an issue, for better or for worse, fundamentally impacted life. She was uninterested in the way that philosophical issues are often approached: as intellectual puzzles, as hairsplitting, or as mental gymnastics. To her philosophy mattered, and in this course we will explore why.

Each week (for the most part), we will discuss a new philosophical issue that Rand addresses in her novels and which helps shape their stories, characters, and conflicts. Basically, we will treat these issues as standalone issues, although we will spend some time interrelating them as the course proceeds.

If we are successful, at the end of the course we will have gained both a deeper appreciation of Rand's fiction and a better understanding of some of the philosophical principles by which Rand thinks one should live. Before one can understand Objectivism as a system of philosophy, one needs to understand some of the main philosophical issues that Rand grappled with and some of the positions and principles she formulated on these issues, as evidenced by her novels. Only then can one genuinely consider the question of how those principles form a system.

COURSE DURATION: 16 weeks

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Lead Instructors

Onkar Ghate

Dr. Ghate is senior fellow, chief philosophy officer, and a board member of the Ayn Rand Institute. He specializes in Rand's philosophy, Objectivism, and is ARI's senior instructor and editor. He publishes and lectures on Rand's philosophy and fiction, including application of Objectivism to cultural issues. He holds a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Calgary.

Ben Bayer

Dr. Bayer is a fellow and director of content at the Ayn Rand Institute. He teaches at Ayn Rand University and gives talks and interviews for ARI. He writes and edits for ARI's online publication, *New Ideal*. Dr. Bayer holds a PhD in philosophy and his writing focuses primarily on the application of philosophy to contemporary cultural and political controversies.

Teaching Assistants

Lead TAs: Nicolas Krusek, Jennifer Minjarez

Assistant TAs: Ricardo Pinto, Sam Weaver, Marek Michulka

RECORDED LECTURES AND LIVE DISCUSSIONS

This course consists of both recorded lectures and live discussions in which we will discuss course material and course assignments. See the course website for a week-by-week *Course Outline and Schedule* of topics, live discussion dates, and assignment due dates.

Important: The first assignment is due before the first live discussion. Be sure to check the date in the *Course Outline and Schedule*.

The course website will also list the Zoom link to to attend.

Participants are strongly encouraged to attend the live discussions for the best experience. However, we are aware that this is not always possible and recordings of live discussions are posted on the course website, usually within an hour or two after the conclusion of each live discussions. Please watch these if you are unable to attend live. Contact aru@aynrand.org if you have any issue accessing a recording.

If you attend the live discussion, please turn on your camera unless you are in a setting with distracting activity going on or your device is not on a stable surface. It makes for a much better experience for all participants when faces are visible.

TEXTS/NECESSARY BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The main readings for the course are Rand's four novels. We are presupposing that students have already read all four of these novels before the course begins.

Our expectation is that during the course you will re-read scenes and chapters from the novels on your own as you think about the novels' stories, characters, and conflicts. Each week we will highlight certain scenes or chapters that are especially fruitful to reflect upon for the philosophical topics that we plan to discuss that week, but these lists will in no way be exhaustive. **The more you mine the novels for Rand's thoughts and perspective on that week's topic or topics, the more you will profit from the course.**

In addition to the main readings (the four novels), most weeks we will also assign a few of Rand's nonfiction essays that contain discussion and analysis relevant to the topics assigned that week. Accordingly, you should also have copies of Rand's nonfiction books.

Here are the books you will need:

- *We the Living* (WtL)
- *Anthem* (AN)
- *The Fountainhead* (TF)
- *Atlas Shrugged* (AS)
- *For the New Intellectual* (FNI)
- *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* (CUI)
- *The Virtue of Selfishness* (VOS)
- *The Romantic Manifesto* (RM)
- *The New Left / Return of the Primitive* (NL / ROP)
- *The Voice of Reason* (VOR)

ASSIGNMENTS

You will be asked to complete the following types of assignments.

Two Types of Weekly Assignments

Two sets of assignments will be given each week. All students will be placed into one of **two groups, Groups A and B**, and each group will be **alternatively assigned one assignment set – 1 or 2 – each week**.

For example, if Group A is assigned Assignment Set 1 for Week 1, and Group B is assigned Assignment Set 2, then in Week 2, Group A will be assigned Assignment Set 2, and Group B, Assignment Set 1. Please check the course website for the group in which you have been placed.

Assignment Set 1 (Answer a Question)

We will pose questions on the course's readings and topics for the coming week, from which **you will select one question to answer**. The questions will be posted every Tuesday at 7 pm UTC with a submission deadline of **Sunday at 7 pm UTC**.

- **Why are you being asked to answer a question before the lecture on the topic?** One major goal of the course is to think philosophically about the stories, characters and conflicts that Rand created. This is not how one normally does or should read fiction. But in this case, of course, we are not reading Rand's novels but re-reading them (or parts of them). In order to get the most out of the course material, including the lectures in the course, you need to approach this re-reading of the novels with an active and self-reflective mind, thinking carefully about the characters and their conflicts. This assignment requires you to do that and then to convey in writing what you think you have understood philosophically about aspects of Rand's novels. The issues you are being asked about will then be explored in more depth in the lectures, with further follow-up in the live class discussions.
- **Grading standards** for each assigned question will be posted on a weekly basis after the live discussion, along with any exemplary instances from student submissions.

Assignment Set 2 (Ask a Question)

A recorded lecture will be posted every Sunday at 7 pm UTC. In this assignment you are required to **submit a question** about the recorded lecture and the topics discussed therein. In submitting the question, **you need to explain your current thinking about the question**: e.g., what is generating the question or why are you asking it, whether you have a hypothesis about what the answer to your question is, whether you think your question is important or not and why, or stating it a bit differently, how gaining more clarity on the matter you're raising will advance your understanding of Rand's novels and ideas. The submission deadline for this is **Tuesday at 7 pm UTC**.

- **Why are we asking for such details when you post your question?** Because these details shape what the question really is and means, and often point one to the path to answering it; the more habitual it becomes for you to ask for such details about your own questions, the easier it will become for you to start answering your own questions.
- **In order to receive full points for the question assignment**, your question must: (1) be a single focused and well-defined question; (2) be relevant to the topic of the recorded lecture; (3) include an explanation of why you are asking the question (e.g., what value you seek to gain by clarifying your confusion on this matter, or why you think you are confused about the issue); (4) be submitted on time and remain within the word limit.

Note that both sets of weekly assignments are aimed at encouraging and developing an active, integrating mind in regard to philosophical issues.

Tutorial papers

Two tutorial papers, one each quarter, in which you will answer one of the assigned topics. In your paper, you should **focus** not on rhetorical style, but **on how clearly you can get your thoughts and arguments stated in writing**. The paper will be discussed in a tutorial session of 45 minutes to one hour with an instructor or teaching assistant(s), and will have a maximum word count of 1,200 words. You will receive a **grade** after the session, which **will take into account both the quality of the written paper and your oral discussion of it** (these two parts are equally weighted for determining your grade for the tutorial).

Immediately prior to your tutorial, you should re-read and reflect on the paper you submitted, and come prepared to discuss its contents and arguments, including how your thinking may have evolved since submitting the paper and proceeding through the course material. The feedback you will receive on the paper will be during the oral discussion of it, so please come prepared to discuss the issues as well as any questions you want to raise.

A list of tutorial questions will be posted on the course website. Tutorial papers must be submitted by 7 pm UTC on the Saturday two weeks following the start of each quarter (**April 26th** and **July 26th**).

The course website will also contain a schedule, listing for each student the week in which your tutorial will take place. Someone will reach out to you closer to the week of your tutorial in order to schedule its exact date and time for that week.

Please note that staying within the maximum word count, when there is one stated for an assignment, is an important part of the assignment and will be reflected in the assignment's grade. A word count requires you to think what is most important and essential, and to state (only) that in your answer.

COURSE PARTICIPATION

As we've said, you are **strongly encouraged to attend live discussions and to actively participate when you do**. We are aware, of course, that this is not always possible. But there are other ways to participate in the course, and course participation will be part of everyone's final grade for the course. The **other ways to participate** in the course are to complete optional assignments and to come to office hours held by instructors and TAs.

Optional assignment

Each week, there will be a forum where you can post a question that has arisen from the readings, your reflection on them, or issues previously discussed in the course that seem connected to the current week's topics. Similar to the required assignment, you should explain why you are asking

the question you are asking. This is one way to participate in the course even if you are unable to attend the live sessions.

Office hours

As stated earlier, the course website contains information about office hours availability and the links to book an appointment. We encourage all students to make use of office hours to discuss both course material and your own assignments. But for those students unable to attend the live sessions, we especially encourage you to come to some office hours, and this is the other way to participate in the course even if you are unable to attend the live sessions.

OVERALL COURSE GRADE

Your course grade will break down as follows:

- 40% of total = average of your short assignment grades, each graded on a scale of 0 to 5
- 22% of total = grade on your first tutorial paper, graded on a scale of 0 to 20
- 28% of total = grade on your second tutorial paper, graded on a scale of 0 to 20
- 10% of total = course participation grade

Your participation grade will be determined by how often you attend and **participate** in the live discussion sessions, by how often you pose questions on the optional question boards, and by the office hours you attend. If you are unable regularly to attend class live, you should each quarter attend at least one office hour appointment and pose three questions on the optional questions board.

GRADE SCALE (with typical reasons for receiving a given score)

[The following grade scale also included in the **ARU Handbook**]

0 – no assignment was submitted

1 – the assignment was submitted, but it either does not answer the question, is too unclear to read, or is too perfunctory to count as taking the assignment seriously (e.g., a one sentence answer).

2 – the assignment answers the question, but it has significant problems (e.g., major points are missing, significant errors are present in the answer, the writing is unclear in important ways).

3 – the assignment is basically good; it answers the question and correctly identifies some major points, but either omits a major point, contains some errors, or does not show enough independent thinking about the issue (e.g., too much quoting of Rand and not enough evidence of the student's own thinking).

4 – the assignment answers the question well and identifies the major points without any major errors and shows evidence of independent thinking about the issue.

5 – the assignment answers the question exceptionally well and identifies the major points without any errors and shows evidence of independent thinking, understanding and insight. (The score of 5 is rare.)

If an answer is on the borderline between two grades, factors such as the clarity or originality of the answer can make the difference between a lower and a higher grade.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly short assignments that are submitted **within** 24 hours after the deadline will receive one penalty point (i.e., one point will be deducted from the grade), while assignments submitted **more than** 24 hours after the deadline will automatically receive a 0. These rules also apply to new deadlines (i.e., those that are set when we grant extensions).

For tutorial papers, late penalties are assigned according to the scheme in the student handbook:

- Up to 24 hours late = 1 point off
- 1 to 5 days late = additional 2 points off (total 3 points off)
- ≥ 6 to 10 days late = additional 2 points off (total 5 points off)
- ≥ 11 to 15 days late = additional 5 points off (total 10 points off)
- ≥ 16 to 24 days late = additional 1 point per day (total between 11-19 points off)

GENERAL POLICIES:

Familiarize yourself with the [ARU Handbook](#) if you have not already done so. Unless specified otherwise in this syllabus, all policies in the Handbook are in effect for this course.

COURSE WEBSITE:

Logistical details about the course are available at the course website, including:

- Live discussion schedule and Zoom link for attending live discussions
- Recordings of past discussions
- Office hour details, including links to book an appointment
- Teaching assistant information
- How to join the ARU Discord server

The course website is also accessible through your dashboard after logging into the [ARU website](#). Contact aru@aynrand.org if you have any issues accessing the site.

COURSE COMMUNICATION:

- Course announcements are posted in the Announcements tab of the course website and automatically emailed to all participants. Please make sure you are receiving these emails and that they are not going to your spam folder. If you join after the start of class, be sure to check the Announcements tab for anything you may have missed.
- For questions about course content, structure or schedule, please ask during the live discussion or in the course channel on the ARU Discord server (see the Discord tab of the course website). Questions about your assignments and grades should be directed to the teaching assistant.
- For personal administrative issues (e.g., website problems), contact aru@aynrand.org.
- If you have a technical issue preventing submission of an assignment, email your assignment to the TA and cc: aru@aynrand.org to troubleshoot the matter.